The Mueller Hut Story

Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

This booklet was published to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park and the opening of the fifth Mueller Hut.

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Written by Shirley Slatter

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Baron Ferdinand von Mueller (1825 - 1896)

HOW MUELLER GOT ITS NAME

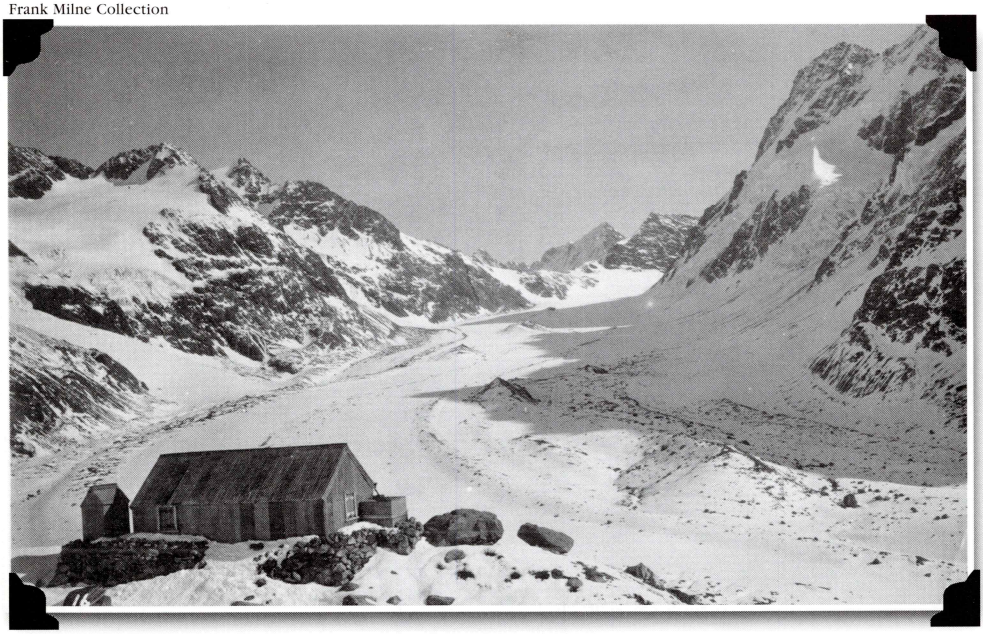
Mueller Glacier was named by Julius Haast in 1862, after Ferdinand von Mueller. He was a Danish-born scientist and explorer, who came to Australia in 1848. Mueller became a great botanical collector and writer.

". . . the newly built Mueller Hut, which can be reached in four or five hours from the Hermitage by two different routes. One is over the Sealy Range, the other up the Mueller Glacier. Both of them offer charming views. The hut is situated on a terrace, 400ft above the glacier. I am quite convinced that the situation of this hut has no rival in the Southern Alps. The scenery and surroundings remind me of a Picture Gallery whose pictures of different countries were exhibited.

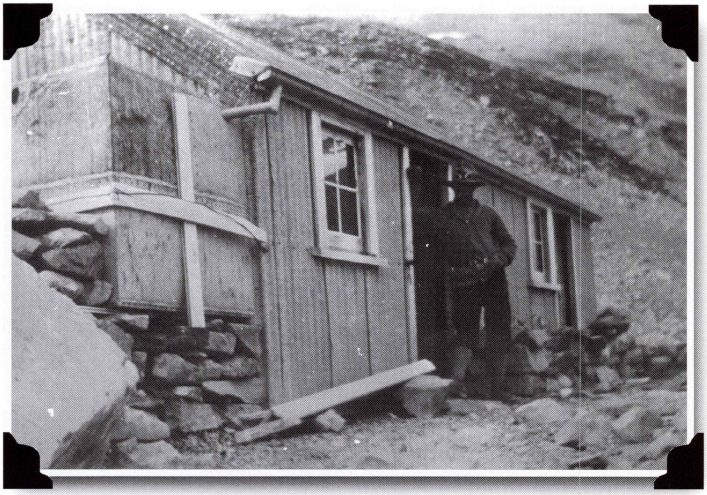
. . . from a climber's point of view this new hut is Paradise, pure and simple."

Where the Clouds Can Go by Conrad Kain

Frank Milne Collection



The first Mueller Hut, overlooking Mueller Glacier



First Mueller Hut

Frank Milne Collection

THE FIRST MUELLER HUT

The original Mueller Hut was built in the season of 1914-1915. It was identical to Hooker Hut, with two bedrooms, one each for the men and women, and a kitchen at one end. Lining consisted of 'tongue and groove' match-lined timber, with dado linoleum elsewhere. The hut measured 24 feet by 12 feet and was only a six foot stud height. Several other huts were built during this era, including Hooker, Ball and Malte Brun huts in the Park and Almer, Chancellor and Douglas Rock huts on the West Coast. They were a Public Works Department design, all similar in size, and were characterised by the separate rooms for separate genders!

Winter sports at Mueller Hut

This first Mueller Hut was sited on a rock ledge originally 300 feet above Mueller Glacier, but by 1947 it was 500 feet above the glacier. The hut was easily reached and was used as a skiing holiday base by guided tourists from the Hermitage. By the end of the 2nd World War, it urgently required repairs, along with Hooker, Malte Brun and Haast Huts.

CLIMBING HUTS AT MOUNT COOK

PROGRAMME OF REPAIRS NEXT SPRING

SUPPLIES TO BE DROPPED BY AIR

For the first time in the history of mountaineering in the high alps of New Zealand, aircraft will be used to drop building materials to parties on isolated plateaus and glaciers, when work starts next spring on the repair and reconstruction of a group of climbing huts in the Mount Cook region.

Announcing plans that have been made, officers of the Public Works Department at Christchurch said that a Dakota aircraft would be used in the work, because some large loads would have to be shifted and extra engine power was needed in such difficult flying country. It was intended to repair the Hooker, Malte Brun and Mueller huts and to rebuild the Haast hut.

Some of the huts in the region have a history which goes back to the pioneer days of mountaineering in New Zealand; but in recent years they have fallen into neglect. War-time shortages of materials and labour are responsible for some of this neglect, and recently the Public Works Department, which is now the agent for this work, has been trying to obtain the services of men capable of doing it.

Ordinary carpenters and labourers are of little use in alpine conditions, and in any case have no detailed knowledge of weather and the many technical problems that have to be considered in designing mountain huts. With the aid of the Canterbury Mountaineering Club, officers of the department were able to secure the services of two experienced carpenters, who are expert climbers, and these men will have the big job of collecting the materials and carrying out the work next summer.

They will receive some limited assistance from guides in the region, who will be asked to provision the huts at which they intend working so that they are not obliged to spend some of their time carrying food from the Hermitage. The work cannot begin until the spring because these huts are all at high altitudes, where it would be impossible to work in the winter.

Condition of the Huts

Reports from climbers who know the area well, indicate that some of the huts urgently need rebuilding and that others require structural alterations to make them more comfortable.

The Malte Brun Hut for instance is a barn-like structure that could still hold about 40 people. It was built originally to accommodate skiing parties before the Ball Hut was available. Now it is too cold for the small parties that use it and needs some internal alterations.

The Haast Hut will have to be rebuilt because it is in a bad position. It is proposed to turn it end-on to the ridge on which it is situated in order to get some shelter from the north-west winds. At present it is built up against a little ledge with the space behind filled in solidly with boulders. The ice which forms around these rocks expands continuously and has forced the hut away from its foundations. Guides in the area for some years have been expecting when the snow cleared each season to find it swept away entirely.

The Hooker Hut is reported to be in dilapidated ruins, and it is though doubtful whether it will last another season. It is very dirty inside and needs general repairs.

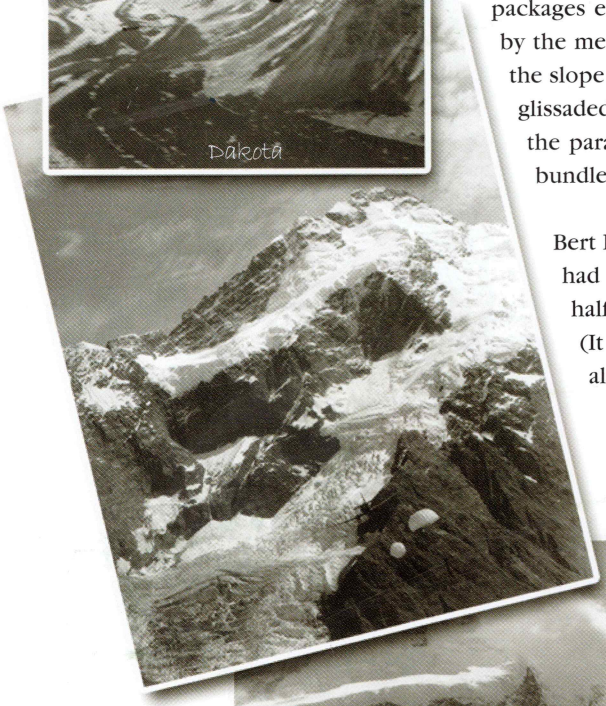
Of the high huts the Mueller is considered the best in use at present, although it needs some alterations too. It could accommodate 8 or 9 persons.

Christchurch Press, June 2nd 1947

THE SECOND MUELLER HUT

In 1949, work started on the second Mueller Hut. This hut was a 're-model' of the first hut rather than a complete re-build. It was one of four huts to have the timber dropped in by an Airforce Dakota. The packages each had a parachute, which were used by the men to help sled the heavy material down the slope to the site. They sat on the bundle and glissaded down using their ice axe as a brake, and the parachute inflated behind as a tow. Every bundle dropped by the Dakota was retrieved.

Bert Barley was in charge of the building and had it completed by 1950. Bert lived in one half of the hut whilst he worked on the rest. (It is said that Bert worked all night and slept all day!)

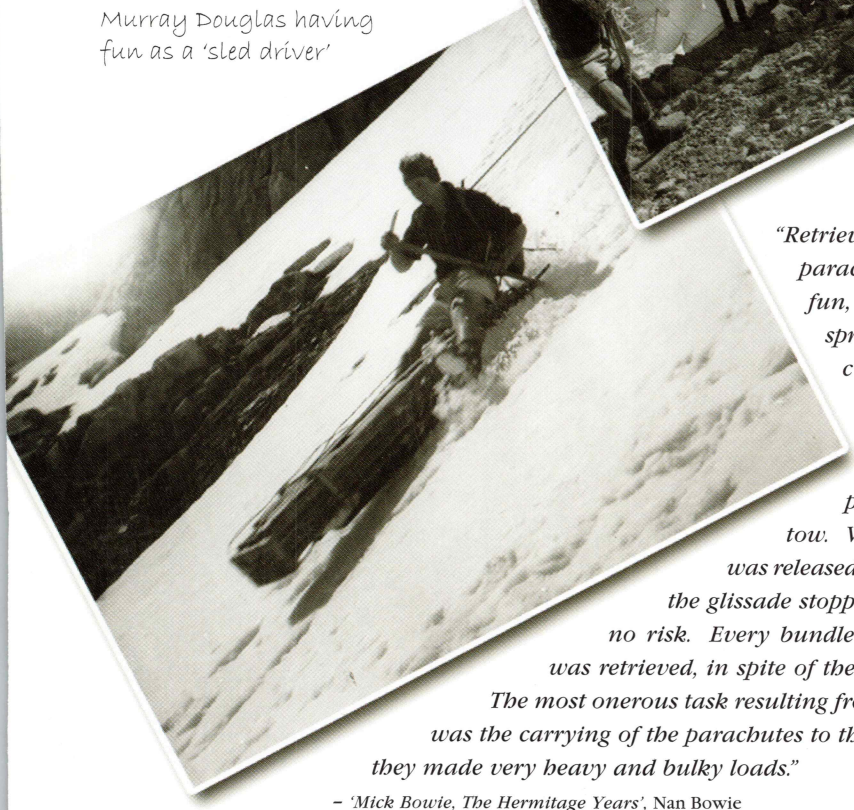


Dropping the chutes
and
retrieving the bundles

Bert Barley Collection

The parachutes made good tows

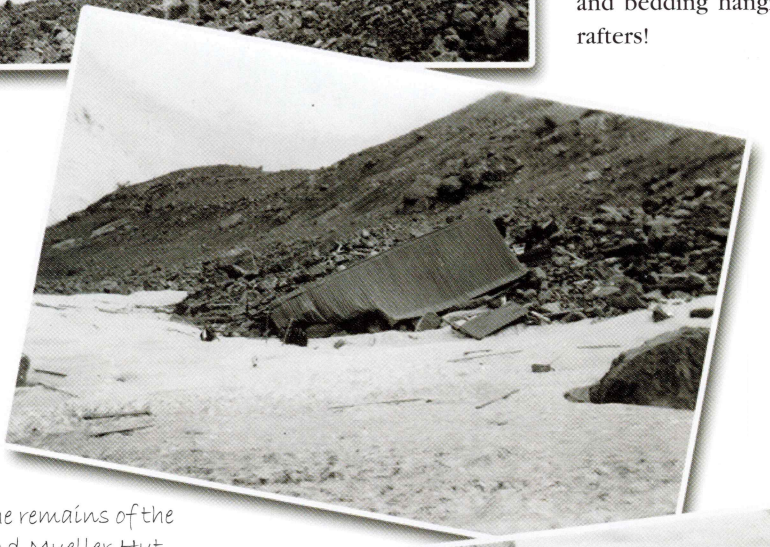
Murray Douglas having fun as a 'sled driver'



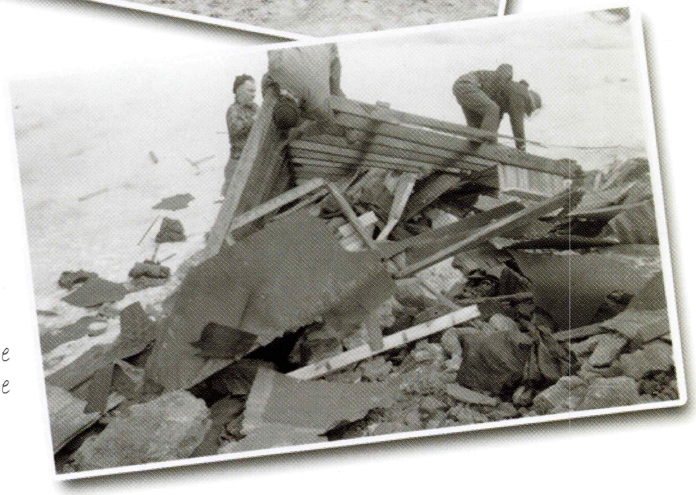
"Retrieving the parachutes was good fun, as a breeze had sprung up and they could glissade along the slopes, using the airfilled parachute as a tow. When the 'chute was released it collapsed and the glissade stopped, so there was no risk. Every bundle and parachute was retrieved, in spite of the rugged terrain. The most onerous task resulting from the air-drops was the carrying of the parachutes to the Hermitage, as they made very heavy and bulky loads."

– *'Mick Bowie, The Hermitage Years'*, Nan Bowie

Unfortunately the hut was never used, and when a party of skiers went to use the hut as a base, they found it had disappeared. The second Mueller Hut had been hit by a wet-snow avalanche, and had slid down onto the glacier. The roof was still intact with all the blankets and bedding hanging in the rafters!



The remains of the 2nd Mueller Hut

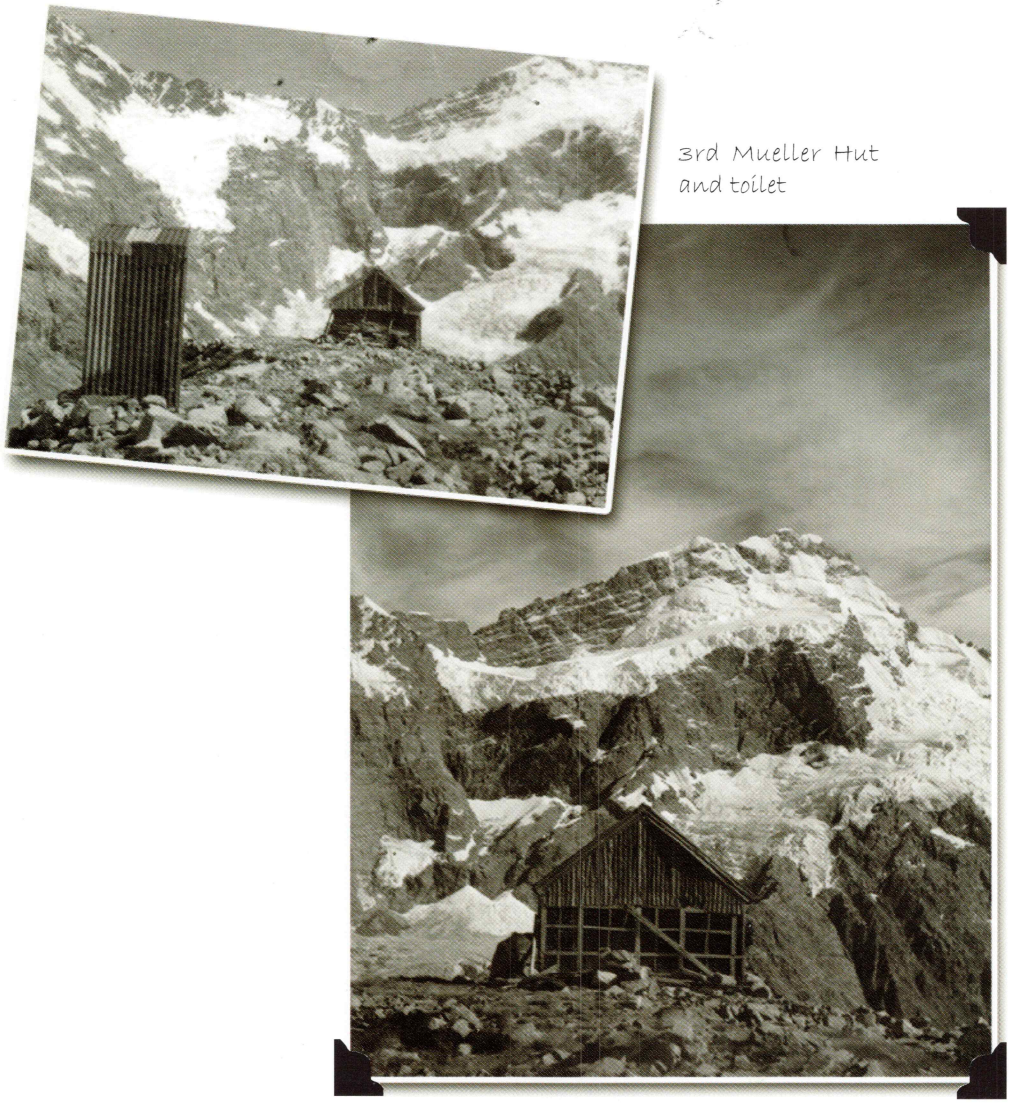


Dismantling the hut to build the 3rd Muellller

Snow Mace Collection

THE THIRD MUELLER HUT

The third Mueller Hut was a temporary structure located on the original site, and built out of the salvaged materials from the second hut. It was a four-bunk bivvy erected to act as an emergency shelter and also served to act as home for the builders of the next Mueller.



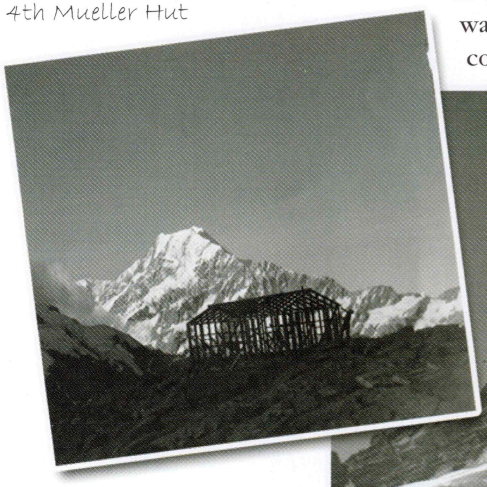
3rd Mueller Hut and toilet

THE FOURTH MUELLER HUT

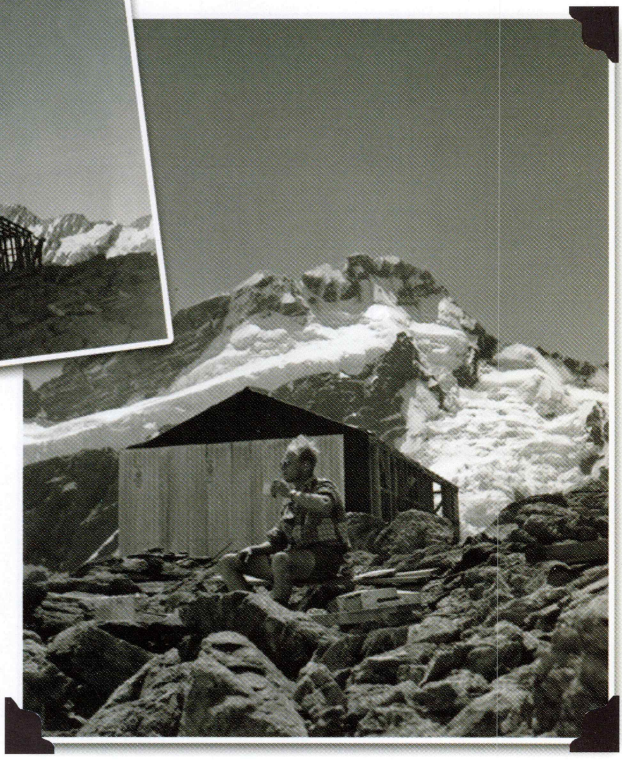
And so a new Mueller Hut was required. It was decided by Mick Bowie (Chief Guide at the Hermitage), to build on top of the Sealy Range at 1800m (6000ft), near Mt Ollivier, where it would be free from avalanches.

The materials were dropped by an Aerovan plane, in 1952. The drop didn't go as well this time, and a strong wind blew them off target. All but two bundles were eventually retrieved.

The fourth hut was completed in 1953 and lasted until 2003 when it was removed. This fourth hut was the first hut in the Park to be built with a porch, which was said at the time to be "a very handy addition to a mountain hut". Originally there were sleeping bunks in the kitchen area, and in 1988 the interior was renovated to create separate sleeping and cooking areas.



Framework of the 4th Mueller Hut



John Turton Taking a break from building

Tents around 4th Mueller Hut

Kea had a laugh on climbers

STAFF REPORTER

TIMARU. - The cheeky mountain kea has just pulled off one of his best practical jokes on two climbers in the Mt Cook National Park.

Camped in the Mueller Hut, the two men were about to make an attempt on Mt Sealy (8650ft) when they were thwarted by the wily bird.

Up early, they went to leave the hut at 4am, and found the door locked.

It appears that during the night the kea had slid the bolt shut.

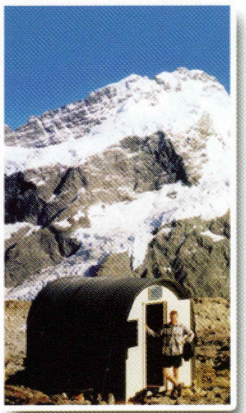
"Apparently this kea has been sitting on a rock watching climbers open and shut the door and he learnt how to do it," the chief ranger (Mr Barrie Thomas) said today.

The two climbers finally managed to escape from the hut after an hour of jostling and shaking the door to budge the bolt – but it was too late to climb the mountain that day.

View of Aoraki/Mt Cook from hut

Photo: Nick Groves

THE WARDENS BIVVY



Hut warden at the Wardens Biv

A volunteer hut warden programme was introduced in 1994 for both Mueller and Hooker Huts. The Hooker programme however, was discontinued in 1995, but Mueller has continued to be very popular. The accommodation for the wardens was an issue, and in 1998 a 'temporary' wardens biv was placed on site. It has been home to many a warden since then, and has also had many a story written about the scary nights endured during nor west storms. Snow and rain were driven into the vent, and the walls had a tendency to flex! The biv was sited 200m from the hut and toilet, which meant in inclement weather it was a mission to go to the loo, and as one warden found, he couldn't even locate the biv on arrival at Mueller Hut! The bivvy was also removed in 2003, as the 5th Mueller Hut had purpose-built wardens quarters incorporated into it.

My Week in the Ice Age

"Oh! I thought this was the toilet", the anxious-looking face exclaimed, as it peered round the open doorway of the wardens bivvy, in which I sat sipping tea. In fact, several trampers I'd met had been similarly mistaken, and needed to scurry down the 500-metre slope back to the Mueller Hut, and on to the nearby toilet, so discretely hidden just below the cliff top. And so, to guide those in need, and to prevent pollution, I cut up an old ice-cream carton and drew on the white plastic a sketch-map, showing the hut, the cliff, and the toilet. I nailed this to the wall beside the hut door, and I built cairns marking the route – all in a day's work of a volunteer hut warden!

Other tasks have included shovelling waist-high snow from the hut door, and cutting a trench to the toilet. I've encouraged people to rope up together before venturing out in a windstorm, and I warn everyone of the meddlesome kea that fly off with socks and tents pegs, sandwiches, bootlaces, sunglasses and cutlery. Kea peck holes in tents and sleeping bags and one dropped a boot irretrievably over a cliff. And truly, one kea locked climbers in the hut.

"But", I am frequently asked, "how did you come to be a volunteer hut warden?" I'd spent many a night in huts, and had cast an envious eye over the wardens, whose jobs appealed to me, and so one wild and wet day whilst sheltering in the Aoraki/Mt Cook Visitor Centre, I read a notice asking for volunteers to warden

at the Mueller. I immediately presented myself as a keen candidate, and when told I could start there the following week, well, I was a happy man.

One week at the Mueller led to another week there, and one hut led to another hut – in fact four others! And one year led to the next, and then to the following year, and now I'm an addict!

But why? I like both the solitude and the socialising. I enjoy the challenge of steaming up the mountain heavily-laden with supplies, and then swimming at the Sealy Tarns under dinosaur-like hanging glaciers; a battery-boosting dip that gives me energy to continue up to the saddle and on to the hut. I love those timeless days of just gazing at Himalayan peaks, and they really are on a Himalayan scale, and at the glaciers and the great ice-cliffs that crumble every so often and make a sound like thunder. I watch the Niagara-like clouds tumble over the divide and then – poof – they vanish into thin air! There are huge clouds like spinning-tops, flying saucers and folded curtains, and at sunrise and sunset, these catch fire and give the peaks a breath-taking alpen-glow.

I enjoy the responsibility of helping keep the hut and surrounds clean and tidy, and of making everyone feel welcome. It's a pleasure meeting people from different lands and I practice the languages I speak. I've made many friends whilst wardening. And the sort of 'spaceship-to-earth' radio contact I keep with the visitor centre and with other huts – well it's exciting stuff for a 63-year-old 'boy' like me!

Wardening at the Mueller is a rich experience, but be prepared! Be prepared for being cocooned in your sleeping bag for days on end in bad weather. Expect loneliness, if you don't relish solitude. You might experience frightening knock-you-off-balance, hut-juddering wind. There's hosing rain, nose-numbing hail, and even after Christmas I have had can't-see-yer-hand-in-front-of-yer-face blizzards, steep slopes of knee-deep slithery slush, and the ice-coated saddle I needed to bum-shuffle across. And don't be surprised if there are some who think Mum is around waiting to unblock their spaghetti-blocked sink, and to carry out empty wine bottles and gas cylinders.

Be well prepared for all of this, and for a multitude of other unexpected vicissitudes. I obviously enjoy it all, albeit sometimes more so after the event, and many trampers have asked me how they too could experience what I call 'My Week in the Ice Age'.

Mark Rosen – written to celebrate
'2001 International Year of the Volunteer'

Slumpage visible from the air

WHY A FIFTH MUELLER WAS REQUIRED

Glacial recession has caused major land slumpage over the years, and it was identified in the early 1990s, by park staff, that the land around the fourth Mueller Hut was starting to slump - tension cracks and a 'rift zone' had formed. Seen from above, the effects of glacial wasting on the mountain top are obvious. Both the toilet and hut were sited on an older slump terrace, and behind the hut an ever widening rock-crevasse was opening up. Formal geological monitoring was started in 1994, and by 2000 the new site for Mueller Hut was identified.

Added to the geological problems, the fourth Mueller Hut itself was showing signs of aging. Visitors in early spring were well aware of the leakage problems in the bunkroom, resulting in wet mattresses and a poor night's sleep.

Use of the hut had also changed. Originally used by climbers as a base to tackle some of the easier and more accessible mountains along the Sealy Range, the pressure from overnight backpackers was increasing. The little alpine hut had become too small for the amount of use it was getting.

THE FIFTH MUELLER HUT

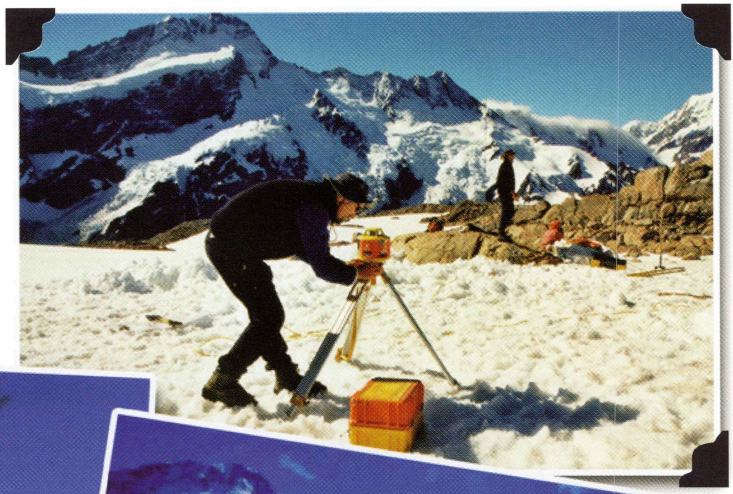
5th Mueller Hut site

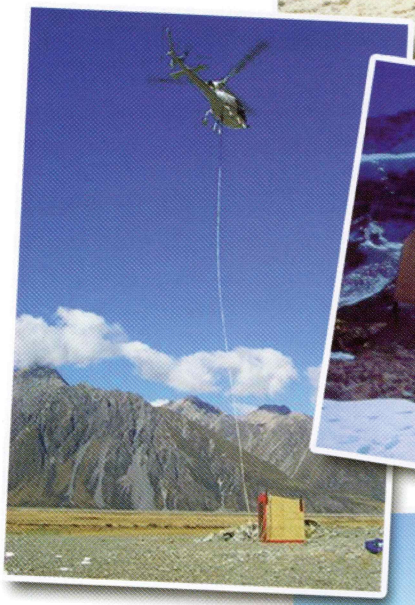
By 2000 a site for the new Mueller Hut had been identified that was as sheltered as possible, geologically stable, flood, rockfall and avalanche free. The site selected is 300 metres south and 30 metres higher than the fourth Mueller Hut.

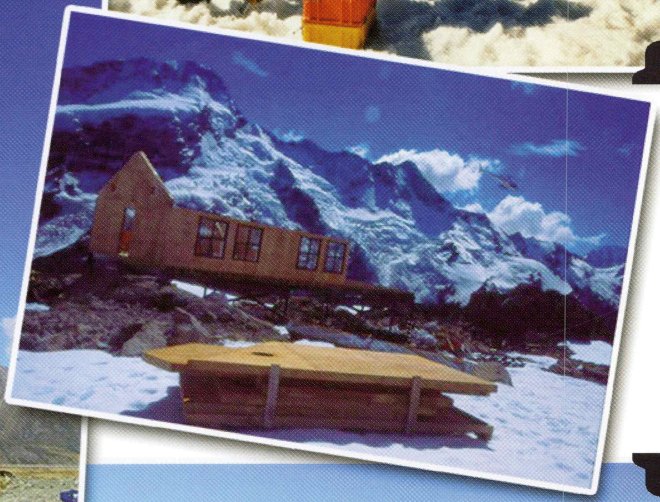
The fifth Mueller Hut was built in Gore to an almost finished stage. It was then dismantled and freighted to Aoraki/Mount Cook Village. A 350 B2 Squirrel Heavylift helicopter flew a total of 130 flights, weighing 59,622 kgs, to get the hut on site. 4000 person hours were needed to erect it in the final position. Tom Hopkins, DOC's Programme Manager Visitor Facilities at Aoraki Area, oversaw the design and building of the hut. "The new Mueller Hut has 28 bunks, wardens' quarters and a new two pan facility. It has been designed to withstand the harsh environment whilst being functional and safe."

5th Mueller Hut erected in Gore

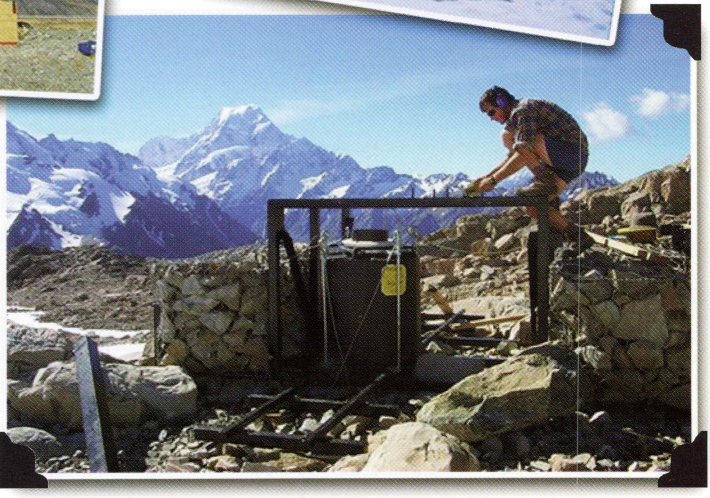
Surveyors at work



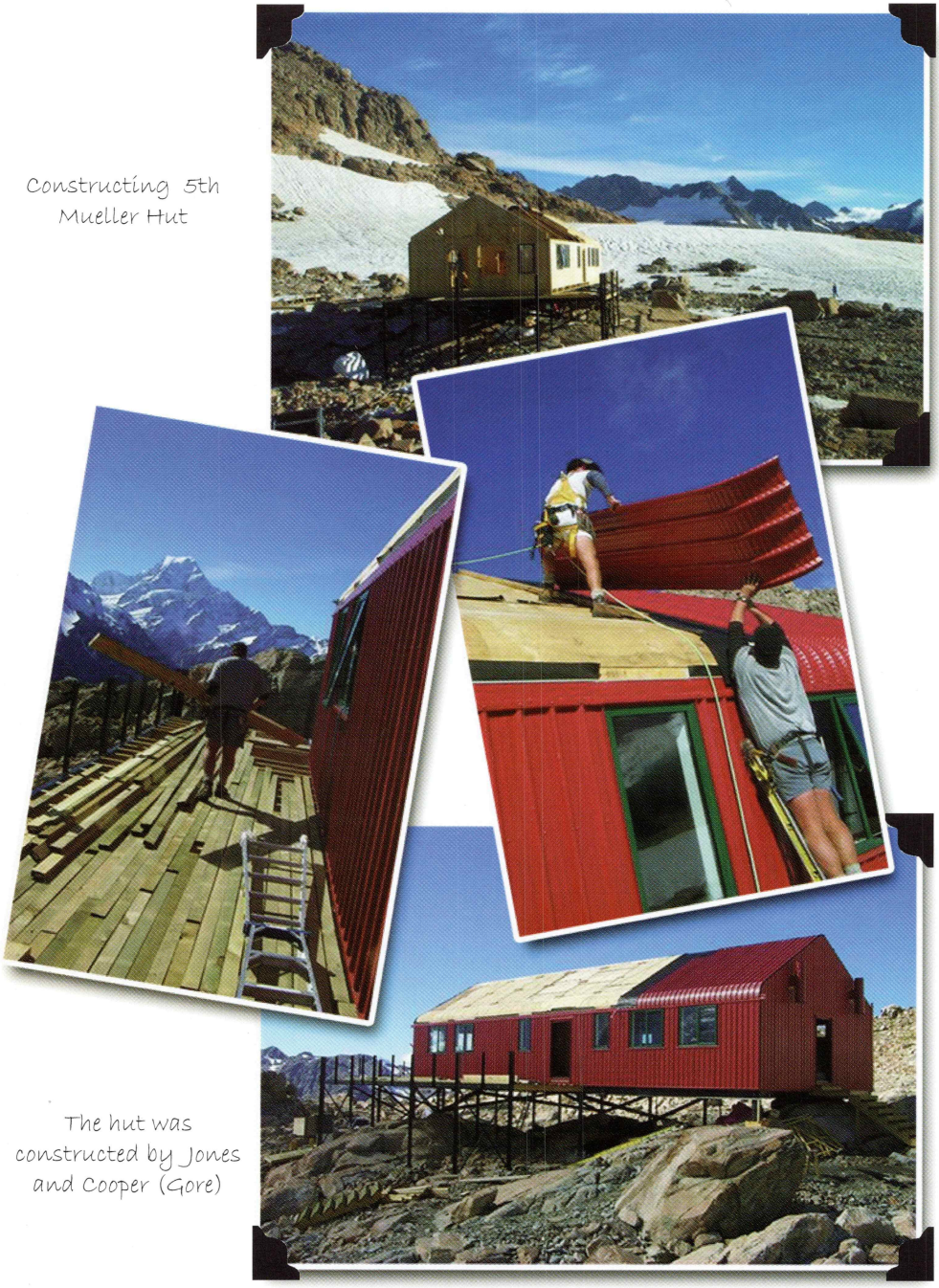




Flying in the toilet

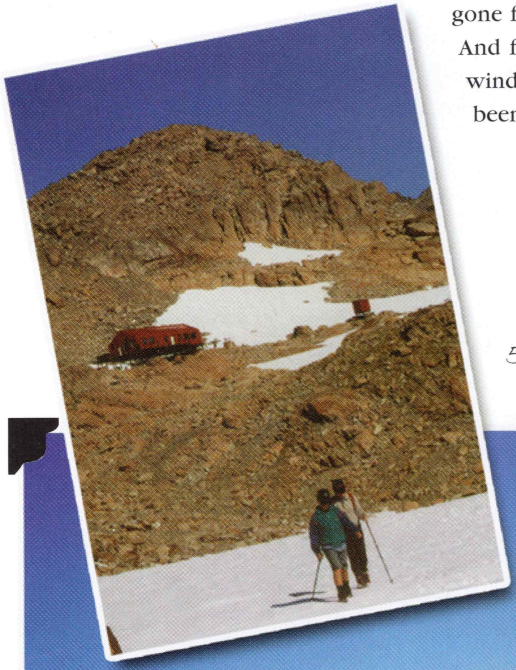


Constructing 5th Mueller Hut

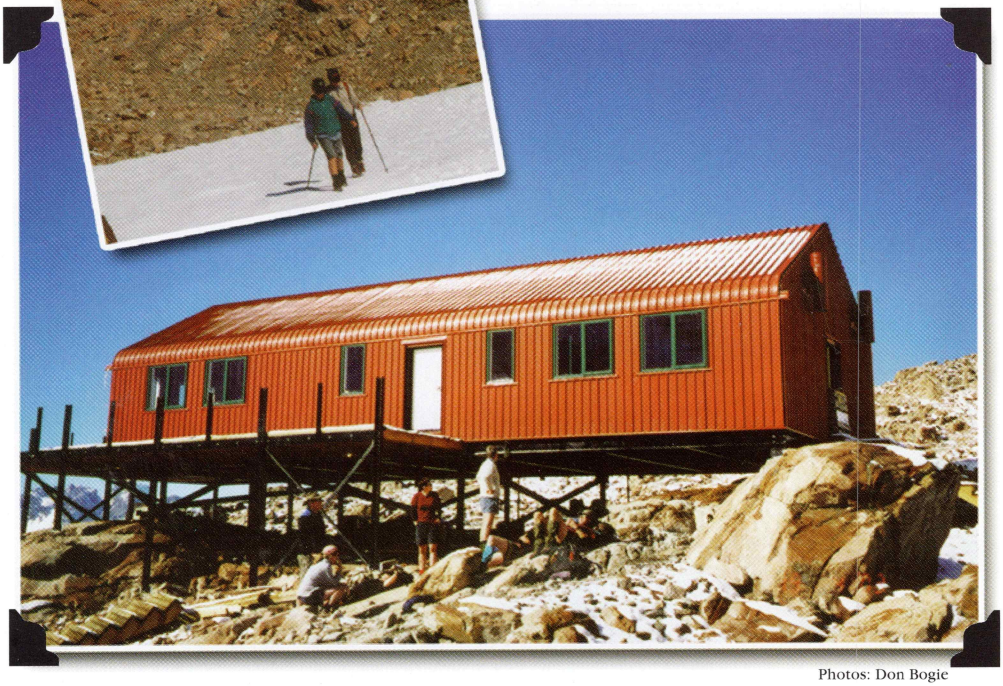


The hut was constructed by Jones and Cooper (Gore)

Along with an increase in floor space and bunks, the new hut has a spacious deck for viewing those amazing sunsets, and gas cookers to reduce the fire risk. The ventilation system is a vast improvement on the old hut, as are the toilets. Gone is the rather smelly long-drop system. The latest toilet system separates the liquids from the solid waste - liquid is discharged to ground, and solids are flown out. The water system has had a major revamp and gone from 2000 litres up to 6000 litres of storage. And for those that feel the cold - double glazed windows, floor and exterior wall insulation have been added - though the hut will remain unheated.



5th Mueller Hut nears completion



Photos: Don Bogie

Officially opened in July 2003 by Sir Edmund Hillary, the fifth Mueller Hut is a long way from the first Mueller both in size and location. Although new, it does have a long history of hut building and use behind it, and will be there for another generation of visitors to experience the magnificent alpine splendour and scenery, storms, sunsets, and stories of those who make the climb.

Rooms with a view

to Aoraki /Mt Cook

and

to Mt Sefton

TRAGEDIES ON SEALY RANGE

Like all mountain huts, Mueller is not without its tragedies. Five people have lost their lives around the hut environs - and one of them Masami Sumaki, is a mystery still to be solved.

16th January 1964: Anthea Georgina Northfield, (late 20's)
Anthea and six others left Mueller Hut intending to go to the Three Johns Hut at Barron Saddle. The weather deteriorated into a blizzard and the group turned back but became separated. Anthea died from hypothermia only a short distance from Mueller Hut.

1st October 1966: Eric Andrew Dahl (48 yrs) and Morris Walter Brehaut (21 yrs)
Eric and two companions flew by ski plane into the Annette Plateau and intended to ski down the Sealy Range past Mueller Hut, and descend to the Hermitage. Eric was traversing underneath Mt Kitchener when he slipped on hard ice and lost control of his skis, sliding 1600ft and over bluffs onto the Mueller Glacier. He died as a result of injuries.

Morris Brehaut meanwhile, was leading a mountaineering instruction course planning to climb Mt Kitchener in the Sealy Range. Half way to the summit they were recalled to Park Headquarters, via an airdrop message, to assist with the retrieval of Eric Dahl. Morris was killed when he slipped and fell 300ft whilst descending the Kitchener Ridge.

20th December 1990: Richard Steven Hayes (21 yrs)
Richard and a companion were climbing Mt Sealy when a rock hold gave way. He fell 700m down the steep East Face into the Dobson Valley and died at the scene from injuries sustained.

12th February 1994: Masami Somaki (34yrs)
Masami was on holiday from Japan with her mother and set out for a day walk to Mueller Hut. She never returned. Masami was last seen at the hut at 1pm, but despite extensive and thorough searching of the area, no further trace was found. The search was repeated a year later with no sign of her.